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A double loss to intelligence agencies

"I count myself fortunate to have had a small part in that undertaking," Adm. Bobby Ray Inman told President Reagan this week. The undertaking to which Inman referred in his letter of resignation was the strengthening of American intelligence services. The country has been fortunate, too.

By his candor, his professionalism in a politically sensitive post and his commitment to civil liberties, the deputy director of intelligence has earned high marks on nearly all sides. The notable exceptions are in the National Security Council staff. Inman's departure will thus be a double loss: The intelligence community loses a first-rate official, and the country loses a strong source of assurance that the CIA will stick to its intended business.

Nothing suggests that Inman was the victim of White House covert action. Apparently he was not destabilized out of office, but grew weary of bureaucratic infighting and decided to begin a non-governmental career. Despite opposition from the National Security Council, Inman last year was instrumental in persuading the president to retain tough controls over domestic surveillance. The result was evident last December in an executive order that defined the jobs of the country's intelligence services. Though it left some fuzzy edges on conditions under which the CIA could operate in the United States, the order was far more restric-

tive than one suggested early in the year by the Reagan administration's right wing.

The intelligence amateurs in the new administration had wanted, among other things, authority for the CIA to return to domestic spying. (That was the period when CIA Director William Casey had appointed a Reagan campaign worker, innocent of any intelligence experience, to head the agency's covert-action operations.)

The top professional thought otherwise. You might expect the man who had been director of naval intelligence, vice director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, director of the National Security Agency and finally No. 2 man at the CIA to concur quietly. Instead he disagreed publicly, pledging on television that no such expansion of CIA authority would occur. Though he largely won that argument, the White House now is evidently bent on heading the CIA back toward its old, discredited ways. Frustration with that development may well have impelled Inman more quickly toward the exit.

Exuding admiration for Inman's achievements and leadership, the president accepted Inman's resignation "with deep regret." Reagan praised Inman for providing "wise counsel," omitting only the unhappy fact that his administration shows no intention of heeding it.